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ABSTRACT

A writing teacher who teachers first-year college writing proposes a "different" approach to the teaching of academic discourse. It is an approach that includes the production of academic discourse and rhetorical analysis yet enables students to examine and often resolve their resistance against academic discourse. Through a critical examination of their acquisition of academic discourse and its effects upon them, students often learn to blur the boundary between the personal and the academic. The instructor began teaching the conflict over academic discourse by soliciting samples of academic writing from the students. Students then considered the ways in which the three academic texts were similar to and different from the personal essays they had written during the first weeks of the term. Students then read several published texts on the issue and wrote responses that focused on specific points of agreement, disagreement or uncertainty for themselves in relation to the texts. The aspect of academic discourse that created the greatest controversy was the issue of specialized terms. To conclude the sequence, students read an excerpt from Mike Rose's "Lives on the Boundaries" and wrote an essay about "academic discourse" in response to the class discussions, their classmates' written reactions, and the published scholars' opinions. By exploring, articulating, and discussing their beliefs about academic writing, the students were actually practicing the composition of academic discourse. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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Telling Stories of Academic Discourse: Narrating Its Acquisition and Analyzing Its Effects

by Donald C. Jones

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Academic discourse has been a central conflict within composition studies for over three decades. This debate has involved the most basic issues of whether or not first year writing students should be taught to compose academic discourse at all and how academic discourse - or should I say discourses? - should be defined. The writing process movement of the 1970's often included a rejection of academic discourse in favor less formal, personal writing. Ken Macrorie, for example, urged student writers to "move toward the personal and away from the dead scholarly paper" (ix). Yet in one of the first critiques of the writing process movement, James Vopat warned that using Macrorie's pedagogy, his own students wrote "well and excitedly about their personal experiences," but they were "at a loss when asked to write about ideas, when asked to question values" (42).

In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae sought to reverse this neglect of academic discourse by asserting that learning "to speak [academic] language" should be the central mission of first-year college composition courses (134). Bartholomae believes that first year students must learn to produce the university's particular ways of "knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing" through a collaborative sequence of reading and writing assignments. This approach represents, according to Patricia Bizzell, one of the two most common methods of teaching academic discourse. The second and sometimes overlapping method for teaching students to compose academic discourse, Bizzell explains, is rhetorical analysis of the conventions of different academic discourses (1). As advocated by Leslie Moore and Linda Peterson, this method teaches students to examine the "essential relations of form, content, and

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audience" by considering the conventions, for example, of the standard seven part scientific lab report (467). One weakness of both of these approaches, however, is their failure to address the considerable resistance that I have found that many students have towards writing academic discourse. These methods were developed in opposition to the personal writing of the 1970's process movement so they do not address many students' distrust of academic discourse because asking students to examine their feelings about academic discourse would smack of "expressivism." Yet when I have asked students to define "academic discourse," their written responses often are more than we may want to hear. For the students' responses range from Their answers ranged from "the specialized language of a discipline" and "the difficult, narrowly understood language used in educational institutions" to "the formal, scholastic . . . language of college professors, stuffy doctorate types who like really big words" and "the stuffy b.s. students use to impress their profs." The oral coments in the ensuing discussion only exascerbated this conflict as some students described academic discourse as "joining a club and leaving others outside" and "like a fashion show where you use words to flaunt yourself." While others stated it was "a more efficient, more accurate language" and "a challenge to students which should provoke their thinking, make them seek greater meanings." These comments reveal the confusion and frustration too many students feel about the purposes and the methods of academic inquiry, but what is more difficult to capture is the anger and the excitement the students showed as, I believe, they finally had a chance to confront this conflict openly in a classroom.

Drawing upon the work of Gerald Graff explicitly and, less overtly, that of Mikhail Bakhtin, John Dewey, and Michel Foucault, I want to propose another approach to the teaching of academic discourse. It is an approach that includes the production of academic discourse advocated by Bartholomae and the rhetorical analysis recommended by Moore and Peterson, yet it also enables students to examine and often resolve their resistance against academic discourse. By considering their feelings - or to use my title phrase, by

telling stories, - students often produce compelling narratives about their acquisition of academic discourse. Once these telling stories have been told, students then can be encouraged to examine them further by reading the assertions of published scholars like Nancy Sommers, Peter Elbow, and David Bartholomae on this issue. Through this critical examination of their acquisition of academic discourse and its effects upon them, students often learn to blur the boundary between the personal and the academic, two terms often constructed in a binary opposition. Most students also develop a greater appreciation of the value as well as the limits of academic discourse by composing what one student realized was "academic discourse about academic discourse"!

By encouraging students to examine their thoughts and feelings about academic discourse, this method explicitly "teaches the conflict" as Gerald Graff recommends in *Beyond the Culture Wars* (12). It is, Graff argues, a grave mistake to assume that since our students do not usually hear their professors debating issues like academic discourse, then they are not exposed to these conflicts on an almost daily basis. Instead, Graff asserts, students *do* experience these conflicts, such as the debate over the literary canon upon which his book focuses. He argues that as students move, for example, from a multicultural introductory course on literary analysis to a more conservative survey of American literature, they experience this conflict covertly as the works of less canonical writers like Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Thomas White Cloud appear on one syllabus then vanish from another -- perhaps to reappear in a subsequent course. Graff therefore states, "academic institutions are *already* teaching the conflicts every time a students goes from one course or department to another, but they are doing it badly" (12, italics original). And the canon controversy is not the only unarticulated conflict that many college students experience.

As two of my students make manifest, first year students are well aware of and bewildered by the conflict over academic discourse. Melissa explains,

> Within my education major, there is a specific criteria . . . [for] our papers. My professors wanted us to analyze our collected information and relate it to class discussions. Yet in my sociology class last semester, my professor wanted only research and no opinion included in our term papers.

And her classmate Matt elaborated upon similar differences, "If I had recognized these differences [in professors' expectations], I would have had an easier time writing these papers." When students are exposed "to an endless series of different positions which are not debated before them," Graff warns, we are following "the best way to make students [into passive] relativists" (15). The goal of some composition students simply becomes to find out what each instructor wants and to deliver it without ever considering the reasons for these different expectations.

Rather than foster this apathetic relativism, Graff's solution is, as I stated, "to teach the conflicts themselves" (12). For example, within the previously mentioned multicultural literary analysis course, the works of Dunbar-Nelson and White Cloud should not only be included, but the scholarly debate over their recent, and still controversial, inclusion to the canon should become "part of [the] object of study" (12). To teach the conflict over academic discourse in my first year writing courses, I began by soliciting samples of academic writing from the students, and I selected a personal response to a musical performance, an application of a sociological concept to two recent examples, and a first-year science lab report. By juxtaposing three actual student papers, I wanted the students to realize that they often compose different discourses within the academy and they already are aware - on some level - of significant discursive variations. I wanted to transform this tacit awareness into articulated knowledge. I have found that when students articulate this previously unspoken understanding, they too become actively engaged in this conflict which we often discuss in our offices, at this conference, and in scholarly publications with our colleagues.

To make explicit the conflict over academic discourse, I asked my students, first, to consider the ways in which these three academic texts were similar to and different from

the personal essays which they had written during the first weeks of the term. My students began by noting that these texts were "very different" from their personal essays. For example, the lab report began with an explicit statement of the objective: "The objective of this experiment was to study . . . [this] and determine . . . [that]" while their personal essays often had started in medias res, and this abrupt immersion into the middle of the action contrasted greatly with the detached topical introduction of the lab report. With phrases like "The weight recorded was . . ." this lab report's often passive and apparently objective voice also differed from their personal essays' more direct and subjective narration. When I asked the students to consider the other two academic texts, many placed the papers on the musical performance and the sociological concept vaguely "somewhere between" the two very different personal and scientific texts. When I asked them to distinguish these texts more precisely, the students answered that the music paper featured a first person narrator involved in the event yet one who also engaged in exposition, such as "in order to play [so] well . . . a drummer must practice . . . [for] years." The sociology paper involved exposition ("A subculture is . . .") plus analysis by examining a detailed example ("The Islamic subculture, however, does in fact share some values and norms with our larger civilization."). Of course, every student did not immediately state these similarities and differences, yet as they participated in a class discussion based on their written analyses of these different texts, most students reached this level of articulated knowledge.

I then asked the students to consider whether these diverse texts fulfilled or contravened the characteristics of "good writing" we had developed as they had revised one of their personal essays. These characteristics included a compelling introduction and sufficient supporting details. Several students asserted these apparently different texts masked similar purposes achieved differently. Both the often abrupt lead of a personal essay and the topical introduction of the lab report sought to attract a reader's interest and to suggest the text's focus. Again, although the description of the music

paper was unlike the "technical stuff" of the lab report, both kinds of information were being supplied to convince the reader of the text's overall validity, or as one student stated, "to make us believe what the writer wants us to believe." Through this examination of these juxtaposed texts, the students were practicing the rhetorical analysis recommended by Moore and Peterson. They began to understand that various texts sought to achieve similar rhetorical effects using different means. There were variations among these discourses that they could discern, examine, and understand better.

To further the students' critical examination of academic discourse, I then asked them to read several published texts on this issue. I wanted the students to learn, as Bartholomae advocates, some of the ways of thinking, writing, and speaking that academics used to address this conflict. I hoped that access to this discourse about academic writing would help the students identify and articulate their positions within the larger context of the current scholarly debate. Although much of the current debate over academic discourse is framed by the binary opposition of personal vs. academic writing, I did not want the students to position themselves at either one or the other of these polarities, to choose an all or nothing position. Instead I hoped that by recognizing the tensions created by this opposition, they could learn to function better within the continuum between these theoretical extremes. Like Elbow, I wanted the students to try "embracing contraries" because I had originally designed this learning sequence to create a smoother transition from the students' first personal essays and their final academic, research-based writing.

After practicing a complex writing process for composing personal essays, some students reverted to one draft research reports filled with lifeless library facts. These students forsook their rich, exploratory writing techniques when they faced what they found to be the intimidating authority of published experts. I had to make the students' reading of these published texts become another lived experience, an intellectual event about which they could write using writing process strategies similar to those of their

personal essays. To prepare my students to respond critically rather than to only summarize two later, longer readings by Elbow and Bartholomae, I first had my students write a quick reaction to three accessible yet provocative paragraphs excerpted from Nancy Sommers' "I Stand Here Writing" (You'll find these paragraphs on page two of the handout). To discourage responses written as summaries, I asked the students to identify two or three assertions by Sommers that they considered to be very significant then explain their significance and "talk back" to Sommers by supporting, questioning, or opposing her statements.

The student's reactions focused on several assertions. Many students agreed with Sommers' statement in paragraph two that they "disappear[ed]" when they composed academic discourse, they found themselves "mouthing the words of others, allowing sources to speak through them unquestioned, unexamined" (425). They did it, and they hated it. Like Sommers in paragraph three, they wanted to reconceive academic discourse as writing that wasn't "remote, distant, and imponderable" (425). Yet one student asked the question "how can you do that?" for many of his peers. Then another student named Jessy said, "all writing is personal, it comes from you," and she quoted Sommers' assertion, back in paragraph one, "it is always the writer's voice, vision, and argument that create the new source" (425). But how could the students, as a third asked, use their voices and visions in the "dry facts" of academic discourse? What these students considered to be the "dry facts" of academic discourse had to become the source material that Sommers said could "thicken, complicate, and enlarge" their writing (425).
I then engaged the students further in a learning sequence as advocated by Bartholomae, one which I hoped would "thicken" their writing by learning two scholars' ways of thinking about academic discourse.

I asked my students to read abridged versions of Elbow's "Reflections on Academic Discourse" and Bartholomae's "Inventing the University." As you recall, Elbow in his "Reflections" questions the distinction between non-academic and academic writing and

argues for the teaching of personal writing which renders as well as of the latter which seeks to explain. Bartholomae, in contrast, stresses the distinction between the two and favors the deliberate instruction of the intellectual stances of academic discourse so students can learn to "invent [the language of] the university" (134). Over the next three classes, the students' spoken comments and written responses created some of the best exchanges of the semester. I believe the students were able to acknowledge and articulate the simmering tensions and troubling confusions concerning academic discourse that they had been harboring for quite a while.

In the students' written responses to these readings, I stressed that I wanted them to focus on specific points of agreement, disagreement or uncertainty for themselves in relation to Elbow and Bartholomae. As in the responses to Sommers, I wanted thoughtful reactions that asserted "I believe . . ." rather than detached summaries that explained "He said . . . ." Many students began, as Emily did, by attacking their own production of academic prose as "spitting out textbook phrases and blindly copying ideas from other sources," for they had been taught to "take careful notes and outline . . . the paper" but not "how to take the information of others and interpret it as their own." Sarah agreed, lamenting what she called the, "language trap" of trying "to sound like an expert on a subject which is actually very foreign to me." It is important to note the distance the students drew between themselves and academic writing, the discourse upon which most of their previous writing instruction had concentrated.

Using the theory of Bakhtin, I understood that one of the primary objections these students had to academic discourse is that they considered it to be "authoritative discourse," meaning a language which is to be received and repeated by students. Many students hated to write academic discourse because they believed it required them to submit to the opinions imposed by a source's "authoritative discourse." In contrast, Bakhtin explains that "internally persuasive discourse" is "half ours, half someone else's" (345). Or as the just quoted student Sarah sought, the writer of internally

persuasive discourse knows "how to take the information of others and interpret it as their own." Yet I found that as these students discussed this conflict so central to their college lives, they too began to create Bakhtin's "internally persuasive discourse." Sarah, for example, quoted a classmate Melissa who stated, writing academic discourse felt like "going through all the right motions only numb." Another student Lauren summed up these student objections to academic discourse by quoting her classmate Lisa who "put it nicely that you end up just rewriting info . . . instead of using fresh knowledge that comes flowing through your head. Your mental computer isn't on." It is important to note that as Sarah and Lauren began to use the ideas of their classmates in their own writing, their mental computers were on. Although these students claimed they did not know how to transfer their direct engagement in non-academic writing to academic discourse, they were, in fact, starting to write discourse that was half theirs and half someone else's.

Even more importantly as these students realized that their peers shared many of their concerns and that academics disagreed over this issue, they also felt empowered to support, question, and oppose published authorities like Elbow and Bartholomae. As the students considered the contrasting pedagogies of Elbow and Bartholomae, some began to discern ways to assert a writer's "voice [and] vision" as Sommers suggested instead of mouthing the unexamined words of others. Kelly, for example, was able to contrast the pedagogies proposed by Elbow and Bartholomae. "Some beginning students," she explained, "often get caught up with the mechanical structure of writing to the point where they do not even understand what they are trying to convey. The result is an insecure writer and perhaps a confused reader." Elbow, she added, advocated the writing of non-academic as well as academic discourse so students "can put the heavy task of 'linguistic and stylistic conventions' aside and focus on interpreting [the] information" (embedded quotation of Elbow by Kelly). Kelly then quoted Bartholomae's contrasting belief that "the student has to learn to speak our [academic] language" by "concentrat[ing]

on formal conventions." She, however, disagreed, "I think Bartholomae has the wrong approach . . . . He stresses . . . formality and style [as] the most important elements . . . . [but] it is the information conveyed and the argument presented" that matters most. Another student, however, agreed with Bartholomae that academic writing was the key to her college success so she believed it should be emphasized.

The aspect of academic discourse that created the greatest controversy was the issue of specialized terms. All of the students were able to offer examples of the academic jargon of particular majors. Keir, for example, explained, "I have witnessed the differences in language between the [music] school where people . . . talk in terms of what is artistically acceptable . . . and the[biology department] where nothing seems to relate to aesthetic value, only to scientific methods and the truth of [various] theories." And another student asserted, "Anatomy and Physiology . . . contains an extensive vocabulary . . . . These terms are used to describe functions, appearance, and location. When [the term] 'base' is used . . . it usually refers to the bottom, but in the case of the heart it is just the opposite. The base refers to the top and the apex is the bottom." She defended these specialized terms because they "provide a uniform system of communication among specialists." Other students, however, questioned its value; Sarah quoted Elbow to disagree that academic jargon can "insulate [students] from experiencing . . . the very concepts the are allegedly learning."

To be more engaged in her academic writing, Lauren wondered, "If I should be writing academic discourse in a way that is understandable to me even if it means not meeting the [expected] level of academic jargon . . . . I would rather accept the bad grade than not understand [my own text]." Lauren further opposed academic jargon because "it feels like the writer is excluding . . . ordinary people." Quoting Elbow, she rejected "the effect of trying to impress or to show off" in academic discourse, such as by using specialized terms (147). Yet Jon disagreed, making a reluctant defense of academic jargon. He stated, "As much as I hate jargon . . . I have to to admit that somehow you can

crunch so much info into a one liner" using special terminology. I then entered the conversation to note, so many students had begun their first responses by writing "I never heard of 'academic discourse' before, but . . ." and they had written vehement and voluminous responses to these issues. Once the term "academic discourse" had been introduced and understood, it had galvanized their thoughts on a previously troubling but tacit topic. This jargon had itself helped them orient themselves within a previously unknown but not unfelt conflict. Although they had been buffeted by their teachers' opposing opinions about academic discourse, these forces had been unseen, invisible until the students had learned the specialized term - "academic discourse." At this point, I think many students realized that academic jargon did not have to serve only as authoritative discourse that disempowered them. They had to make these intimidating terms at least half their own.

To conclude this sequence, I asked the students to read an excerpt from Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundaries, and to write an essay about "academic discourse" in response to the class discussions, their classmates' written reactions, and the published scholars' opinions. Several students were able to reconsider some of their previous assumptions about academic discourse. Melissa, for example, had felt liberated as a writer when she began to write personal essays at the semester's start, but she now realized, "the importance of learning how to write an academic essay" and its difficulties. Quoting Rose, she explained, "Many young people come to the university able to summarize . . . or write a personal response . . . but they have considerable trouble with what has been called critical literacy." Melissa included herself in this category, and she now wanted to master the difficult but more comprehensible tasks of critical or academic literacy.

By exploring, articulating, and discussing their beliefs about academic writing, the students actually were practicing, to the surprise of several, the composition of academic discourse. They were, as Elbow advocates, trying to assert their opinions to readers using reasons and evidence drawn from more than their personal experiences. They were

defending their beliefs and anticipating the possible objections of others. Thus, as Bartholomae proposes -- and I think its important to note the similarities as well as the differences between Elbow and Bartholomae -- the students were placing their beliefs within a larger context of others' opinions. Some students realized the value of this contextualization. Kelly, for example, stated, "including quotations . . . was effective to convey my thoughts . . . in a formal manner in [this] academic paper on academic discourse." As many students recognized the authority of their classmates' opinions, they too became active, assertive learners who sought to invent their positions within the university's own conflicted discourse concerning academic writing. When I asked the students if their final essays represented academic or personal discourse, many could not categorize their writings. For their previously binary conceptions of the 'personal' and the 'academic' had begun to blur as they realized academic discourse could include a writer's direct involvement even when cloaked by a lab report's passive voice constructions.

As Graff proposes, these students never reached or even sought a final solution to the conflict over academic discourse. Yet by actively engaging in, rather than passively experiencing, this debate, the students were better able to understand their positions on this frequently traveled, but previously uncharted terrain. They had drawn a cognitive map of a conflict they had often experienced. But now the supposed distance between personal and academic writing did not seem so vast because many could use rhetorical analysis, discourse variation, and academic conceptions to orient themselves. Whether they finished this two week sequence still favoring personal writing or direct instruction of academic conventions mattered less than their more articulate awareness of the issues involved. Some like Jon learned to consider academic discourse from various perspectives. Distinguishing personal writing from academic discourse, he observed, is like asking "Where does the ocean meet the land? . . . From the an airplane 500 feet above, the answer is quite obvious. But to someone standing on the beach, the waves

make things quite a bit more complicated." Many students developed less dichotomous, more sophisticated understanding of the academic and the personal. Megan, for example, concluded at the semester's end,

> It was not until I read the articles on academic and personal writing that I remembered when I enjoyed writing. These articles helped teach me that writing for school cannot be only the facts. . . [I had thought] academic writing was achieved by separating myself from the piece . . . [by not] interjecting my thoughts . . . . [I now think] the only way to write an academic paper is first to internalize the topic [through learning what others have said]. Then [you] form your own ideas, and this is when writing for school (the academic writing I had detested so) will become personal. With this new understanding of what was really expected in a paper, I started to see my writing in a new light.

To conclude I would like to refer briefly to the theories of John Dewey and Michel Foucault in order to explain further why teaching the conflicts as Graff advocates created this "new light" for Megan and many of her peers. Like Dewey, I created a pedagogy based on the pragmatist principle that "experience is the starting point of . . . thought" meaning student thought - in this case - about academic discourse, yet this assignment did not end with previous experiences. As Dewey advocates, I wanted students to identify "felt difficult[ies]" in their stories about academic discourse so they would engage in the constructive process of knowing (107). This construction of knowledge, as Dewey and Foucault both assert, must acknowledge the influence of language upon thought. Thus, the students examined the effects of the specialized terms of academic discourse and as Foucault especially would stress, they confronted the power relations perpetuated by jargon that can be exclusionary. Through their telling stories about academic discourse and those of others, many students realized some of the freedom that Foucault and Dewey theorize an agent can achieve when the complex and often conflicted matrixes of discourse are analyzed.